NIGHTS AT THE OPERA

# WAGNER'S TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

*By Wakeling Dry*

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A series of hand-books for the music-lover, the object of which is to reproduce in an attractive form an analysis of the music, with a running commentary on the dramatic element in the opera to which it is devoted.

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BY WAKELING DRY

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# NIGHTS AT THE OPERA

Richard Wagner

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## I. Wagner, the Exile.

IN Tristan und Isolde, the seventh of Wagner's works (counting them in order of publication), we have Wagner in his most advanced style, which shows to perfection his ideal union of music and drama in a manner unsurpassed even by Parsifal. Like Die Meistersinger, it was composed at one of those acute epochs of Wagner's life which are so hard to understand and still more difficult to speak about.

In 1849, Wagner was at Dresden. When (in March of the previous year) he had finished the scoring of Lohengrin, he was led on to the conviction

that a mythical subject alone could give him that freedom, both in respect of words, character-painting and music, after which he was striving. His essay on the Nibelungs was followed by one upon the Nibelung Myth, as the materials for a drama. He next set to work upon the first text of Siegfried. Although he wrote to Liszt and told him he would set this to music, he had found by 1851 that it was impossible to condense the matter into a single drama, but that it would inevitably expand into four.

Between these dates, however, the revolution of 1849 had taken place, and since it had such an important and lasting effect on the life of Wagner, it may be well just to touch briefly upon this particular period. Wagner's share in it has been very largely misunderstood, and Mr. W. Ashton Ellis, in his

pamphlet "1849 : a vindication," issued in reply to the statement of Praeger, has done much to put matters straight. There is nothing to prove that Wagner was a red-handed revolutionary or that he fired a musket in the streets of Dresden. The acts attributed to him were doubtless those of a young baker of the same name. The composer's actual share in the movement consisted in helping to get men and stores into Dresden. He even went so far as to embrace one of the leaders enthusiastically after a speech at the Town Hall. Although the insurgents were at first successful, the Prussian troops after a day or so put them to flight, and Wagner escaped to Weimar, where he took refuge with his devoted friend and admirer, Liszt. But this was not to be his asylum, and he was forced to leave

for Zurich on the very day which had been fixed for a performance of Tannhäuser.

The first years of his exile at Zurich were taken up by writing his prose works with the idea of promulgating his theories. For five years he wrote no music, and the struggle for existence made this period one of the keenest anxiety. Yet this terrible time proved to be one of the greatest value for his art.

That vast conception of a trilogy with a prologue, The Ring, was the work to which he turned when his prose writings were coming to an end. Das Rheingold was finished in 1854, Die Walküre in 1856, and half of Siegfried in 1857.

Then the bitter thought that this great work would leave him still further

away from the opera-house, and in consequence, bind the chains of grim poverty still closer about him, made him break off in despair and cast about for a shorter work more likely to find immediate acceptance somewhere. At the beginning of 1855 Wagner told Liszt that he had in his mind the story of Tristan und Isolde, the simplest and most full-blooded musical conception; and in December, 1857, the first act was finished. After a visit to Paris in the hope of arranging a performance of Rienzi, Wagner returned to Zurich, where he arrived after the loss (through a thieving waiter) of the royalties which his publishers had advanced on account of Tristan.

By June, 1858, Wagner's sketch for the second act was finished, and then another fit of restlessness and utter

weariness came upon him. He proceeded to Venice and there wrote the second act in its entirety. Here, however, he was not allowed to remain in peace for long. Harassed by the Saxon Government, and, as usual, sadly encumbered with debts, he took up his abode by the lake of Lucerne. The third act took him four months to write, and was completed by the summer of 1859.

It is of special interest to learn from Wagner's own lips that this magnificent love tragedy was an inspiration. Much has been written about the development of Wagner's ideas and theories, and his purpose in life. But the words and music of Tristan came straight from the depths of the man's soul. The pinch of poverty, the irksome debts, the horrible nervous illness, the dismal

outlook—none of these could stem the impulse of his inspiration. His work became dearer to him than ever, the melody flowed like a gentle stream. His theories became merely the necessary preparation, a system, over which he rose, with absolute certainty, to untouched heights of musical expression.

## II. The Story and its Sources.

THE Legend of Tristan and Isolde, as Wagner found it in Godfrey of Strassburg's unfinished epic, is a superb piece of narrative poetry. Wagner's genius as a poet is shown by his treatment of the materials no less than by the beauty of the lyrics. In none of his dramatic creations is the poetry of this tragedy surpassed. In his development of the plot nothing extraneous is introduced; and with the fewest number of characters the drama proceeds with a sure swiftness to its impressive end.

Tristan of Lyonesse, the hero, is of royal birth. Both his father and mother

being dead, he is brought up by a trusty follower and educated in all the knightly accomplishments. On reaching man's estate, Tristan is adopted by his childless uncle Mark, King of Cornwall. This king is obliged to pay a tribute of men and money to the King of Ireland, and to free his country from this burden Tristan slays Morold, the Irish champion, at the same time receiving a wound which threatens to become mortal. He then thinks of Isolde, daughter of the Irish King, famed as a skilful healer of every kind of disease : and to seek her aid he goes to Ireland in disguise, calling himself Tantris. On his return to Cornwall healed of his wound, he describes Isolde in such glowing terms that Mark resolves to wed her. Returning once again to Ireland, Tristan learns that Isolde has been promised as a

reward to him who shall rid the country of a horrible dragon. Tristan succeeds in killing the monster, and in his uncle's name claims the hand of Isolde. Thus it is that Tristan brings Isolde back to Cornwall. On the voyage, by mistake, they both drink of a love potion entrusted to Brangäne, Isolde's waiting-woman. Isolde becomes the wife of King Mark, but her love for Tristan continues. Mark discovers the attachment and the lovers eventually outwit him and escape together. Subsequently Isolde returns to her husband and Tristan weds another Isolde, surnamed "of the white hand." He endeavours to stifle all remembrance of his previous and still all-absorbing love by deeds of the utmost recklessness. Wounded again, he once more seeks the healing art of the first Isolde. The second Isolde, jealous of her rival, by

telling him that a black sail appears on the horizon when in reality it is a white one, deceives Tristan, and in grief and despair he dies. The first Isolde, on learning that she has come too late, also dies, and King Mark, on hearing the secret of the magic potion, is touched with sorrow for the unhappy fate of the lovers and causes them to be buried in the same tomb.

This, briefly put, is the tale as told in the thirteenth century by Godfrey of Strassburg, who, as he himself tells us, took it from Thomas of Britanie, who in turn had derived it from the Britannic Books. Since Britanie may stand either for Britain or Brittany, it would seem that Godfrey took it from the old Anglo-Norman Romances. Space does not permit us to point out the similarity of the legend to archaic myths, both

Aryan and Semitic, as well as its gradual confusion with the legends of the Round Table: nor yet to show that in Celtic folk-lore, both Tristan and Brangäne the waiting-woman had each a separate legend. It is sufficient to show that Wagner, with his genius as a dramatist, apart from his genius as a musician, altered the tale to suit his own purpose, and took no account of the additions and alterations to Godfrey's poem by Alrich of Thurheim and Henry of Friberg.

This legend, which struck the keynote of Romance in the middle ages, was one which, as may be imagined, instantly appealed to Wagner. Godfrey, with all his art, could not rise above the sordid display and portrayal of passion. It is intensely human, as may be seen from his careful description of all the tricks

Isolde used to conceal her inconstancy from her husband, but it is gross. In a word, Wagner, by omitting the second Isolde, and by emphasizing, throughout the drama, that longing for death to which the lovers constantly give utterance, purges the gold of its dross.

In Wagner's supreme love-tragedy, a work which takes rank both with Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and Goethe's "Faust," it is not the love-potion which brings these two hapless lovers together. With his keen eye for dramatic effect Wagner uses it merely to make the spectator *see* the fate which pursues them. When Isolde raises the sword against Tristan, on discovering in him the murderer of Morold (who, in Wagner's version, was her lover), it is the look in Tristan's eyes which reveals to her that he loves her. It is her love

for him, which she realizes then, on the instant, that makes her hand fall helpless. Out of loyalty to his uncle, Tristan has carefully concealed his own love from her whom he was wooing for another, and Isolde at first mistakes this for disdain.

Wagner makes Tristan show that he knows of Isolde's love before he consents to drink what he believes to be the death-potion. This vital point, it must be confessed, is not always clearly brought out by exponents of the part. The love-potion is henceforth of little matter to the lovers. After the first ecstasy comes the awful awakening, with the realization that they must live with this terrible burden of love upon them.

Another point of great importance is shown in Wagner's treatment of the character of King Mark. Instead of spying upon the lovers, he is brought to

hear of their meeting through a treacherous friend, and his chief sorrow is that his beloved Tristan has been disloyal to him. Mark makes no attempt to wreak his vengeance on the pair. It is Melot that makes the thrust at Tristan which has an effect so nearly fatal.

As Siegfried was interrupted by the conception and the subsequent working out of Tristan, it is interesting to note what Wagner says with reference to the connexion between the characters of Tristan and Siegfried.

"The complete equality between the two consists in this, that both Tristan and Siegfried, bound by an illusion which makes this deed of theirs involuntary, woo for another their own predestined bride, and, in the false relations arising therefrom, find their doom. What in the Ring could only

come to rapid utterance in the climax, becomes in Tristan the subject of a many-sided exposition ; and it was this that formed my incentive to treat the story at that precise period, as a supplementary act of the great Nibelung Myth, a myth that compasses the wide relations of a world."

In H. E. Krehbiel's very interesting book *Studies in the Wagnerian Drama* there is a comparison between the versions of the Tristan legend as treated by Malory, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson and Swinburne.

## III. The Production of the Drama.

ALTHOUGH completed by the beginning of August, 1859, a long time was to elapse before Tristan was to see the footlights. In the six years that passed there came that terrible second journey to Paris when the "command" performance of Tannhäuser ended in such a bitter disappointment. The death of Ander, of Vienna, for whom Wagner had consented to make certain alterations in the music, was only one of the many circumstances which seemed to combine to keep Tristan from being produced. To Dresden, and then once more to

Vienna, Wagner's waning hopes were turned.

At last, in 1864, King Ludwig came to his aid, and on June 10th, 1865, the first performance took place, under Hans von Bülow's direction (Wagner superintending the study of the music and the mounting of the work). Four years previously Wagner had met both Herr and Frau Schorr von Carolsfeld, and had found in them almost his ideal exponents of the parts of the lovers. Zollmeyer, was Mark ; Deinet, the Brangäne ; Heinrich, the Melot ; and Mutterwurzer (the original Wolfram in Tannhäuser), the Kurwenal. After Schorr's death, which occurred soon afterwards, Tristan was not heard again at Munich till 1869, when it was again given under von Bülow's direction. Performances then followed at Weimar

in 1874 ; Berlin in 1876 ; Königsberg and Leipzig in 1881 ; and Hamburg in 1882.

London saw it during a run of German opera which Sir Augustus Harris introduced at Drury Lane on June 20th, 1882. Hermann Winkelmann was Tristan, and Rosa Sucher the Isolde. Marianne Brandt was Brangäne, E. Kraus the Kurwenal, Eugen Gura the King Mark, and Joseph Wolff the Melot. Dr. Richter conducted.

Under Anton Seidl, the Metropolitan Opera House of New York saw it on December 1st, 1886, with Niemann as Tristan, Lilli Lehmann as Isolde, Emil Fischer as King Mark, Marianne Brandt as Brangäne and Adolf Robinson as Kurwenal.

In the same year it was first done at Bayreuth ; Levi and Mottl were the

conductors, and Gudehus, Vogl and Winkelmann were seen as Tristan; Plank and Scheidemantel as Kurwenal; Siehr and Wiegand as King Mark, Rosa Sucher, Malten and Materna as Isolde; and Standigl and Sthamer-Andriessen as Brangäne.

It was first given in English by the Carl Rosa Opera Company under Hamish McCunn at their season in London at the Lyceum, in 1890, with Lucille Hill as Isolde, Kirkby Lunn as Brangäne and Philip Brozel as Tristan.

## IV. *CHARACTERS OF THE LYRIC DRAMA IN THE ORDER OF THEIR FIRST APPEARANCE.*

A Sailor Lad (*tenor*).

ISOLDE, Princess of Ireland (*soprano*).

BRANGÆNE, Isolde's friend and attendant (*mezzo-soprano*).

KURWENAL, Tristan's devoted servant (*bass*).

TRISTAN, a Breton Knight, nephew of King Mark (*tenor*).

Chorus of Sailors (*tenors and basses*).

Chorus of Knights, Esquires and Men-at-arms (*tenors and basses*).

MELOT, one of King Mark's Courtiers (*tenor*).

KING MARK of Cornwall (*bass*).

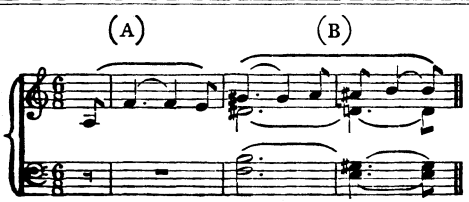
A Shepherd (*tenor*).

A Pilot (*bass*).

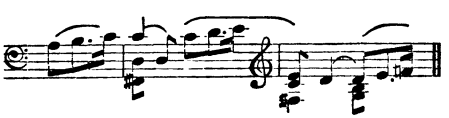
## V. Music and Story side-by-side.

### The First Act.

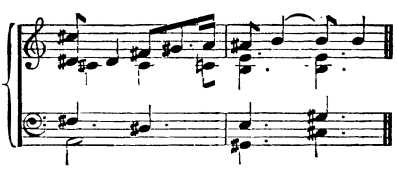
IN the wonderful prelude which is heard before the rising of the curtain we have a foretaste of the emotional music which throbs and glows throughout the work. It is made up of seven motives, but one (which is divided into two phrases, the *Confession of Love* and *Desire*) dominates the whole.

(A) Confession of Love and (B) Desire.

This second half (which, in the prelude, is a natural completion of the first) will be readily recognized under its many and varied forms in the drama. It is at once ineffably sad and intensely passionate.

As in the drama, Wagner makes a special point, in the music, of the glance which passes between the lovers, and by which they learn of the love which absorbs them before the drinking of the philtre.

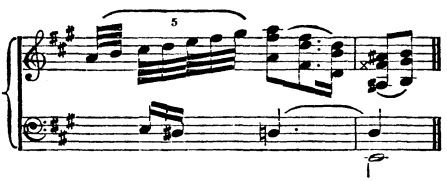
THE GLANCE.

This theme, developed at length in the prelude, is frequently heard in the body of the work, in many fresh and interesting

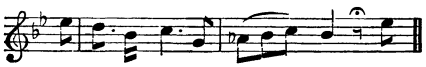
forms. We next hear a poetical and most expressive theme—

THE LOVE-POTION.

This is immediately contrasted, with gloomy and telling effect, by the succeeding phrase, which may be labelled the Death-draught. Its sinister import is marked by Wagner's use of it, first in the brass and afterwards in the wood-wind, in which the bass-clarinet has an important share.

After a gradual and superb *crescendo* in which the *Glance* is largely used, we

hear the last of the motives used in the prelude—

DEATH THE DELIVERER.

The scene revealed on the uplifting of the curtain shows us the interior of Isolde's pavilion on board the vessel which is bearing her to Cornwall. The rich tapestries entirely enclose the scene, and Isolde is reclining on a couch. A sailor lad is singing of his absent sweetheart, and this Isolde takes as an insult to herself. The third phrase of this song constitutes a motive often used to express the distaste which Isolde feels for the voyage.

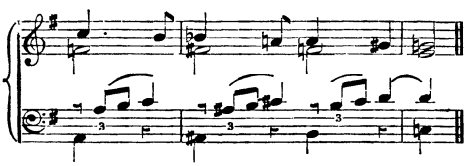
THE SEA.

She sends Brangäne to find out how far they are advanced on their journey. In despair, she learns that land is in sight and the end of the tedious voyage at hand.

Isolde now demands that Tristan shall be sent for. During the whole of the voyage he has avoided her. Brangäne draws aside the curtains and the stern of the vessel is seen with Tristan at the helm. The sailor's song is now heard again, muttered, as it were, by the basses. Isolde gazes on Tristan in gloomy meditation. Here the exceptional beauty of the lyrics must be noticed. To the melody of the *Death* motive she sings to herself how Tristan was once hers, and how he has been

snatched from her. Death must consecrate their love.

"Thou my chosen,
Thou my lost one,
Proud and peerless,
Strong and fated,*
O death-doomed head,
O death-doomed heart."

When Tristan learns from Brangäne of her mistress's wishes he is afraid of himself. He excuses himself by saying that he cannot leave the helm.

THE WOUNDED TRISTAN.

Isolde, full of bitterness, now opens

* In the original, *feig* is exactly our Scottish word *fey*, when a man is near to death. It is the oldest meaning of the word, and current also in Icelandic.

her mind to Brangäne. She tells her of the care she bestowed upon Tristan when he came to her wounded and like to die. She still keeps her love to herself, thus hiding the true cause of her sorrow. Brangäne endeavours to pacify her, and points out how Tristan has shown his gratitude by obtaining for her the hand of King Mark and the possession of his beautiful country. Brangäne misinterprets the self-communings of Isolde, and advises her mistress to have recourse to the potions with which the Queen had provided her before setting forth on her journey. Isolde bids her bring the casket, but it is not with the idea of choosing the love-potion. A darker purpose has crossed her mind. She picks out the death-draught for Tristan to drink. The contrast here between

the terrible mood of Isolde and the entry of the joyous chorus of sailors is especially effective.

Kurwenal, with a song that is closely allied to a folk-tune, now enters and announces that they are within sight of land. Isolde now begs again that Tristan may come to her, and orders the distracted Brangäne to fill the cup with the poison.

Singularly impressive is the music heard at Tristan's entrance. The long note with which it begins swells out until it leaps upwards, to die away in a wail. It clearly conveys the idea of a hero coming to salute his queen.

Isolde now upbraids him with keeping away from her. She reminds him moreover of the debt between them, one of blood. She has not forgotten, nor forgiven, the slaying of Morold.

Tristan must accept his punishment at her hands. Silently Tristan bows his head to his doom. He is ready to expiate his crime and he hands her his sword.

But the glance which passes between them reveals their secret. Isolde cannot kill Tristan whom she loves, and life with any one but him would be unbearable. Let them both drink of the cup of forgiveness, and—forgetfulness! Tristan sees the dread meaning and consents to die. In this belief he drinks of the cup (which Brangäne has changed for the love-potion), and Isolde drains it to the dregs. After the supreme moment when they both await their doom, and find in its place a stronger love, which burns as it courses through their very being, they fall into each other's arms. Brangäne tries to hide them from the attendants, who bring up the royal robes

for their princess, and to bring Isolde back to the outward world confesses, in anguish, her substitution of the love-philtre for the poison. As the boat bearing King Mark draws near, Isolde falls fainting into Brangäne's arms, while the joyful shouts of the people resound in combination with the *Sea* motive heard at the commencement of the act.

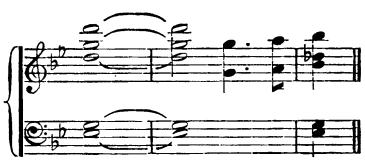
## The Second Act.

"O night of rapture, rest upon us,
Lift our lives' remembrance from us,
Now end our anguish, gracious Death!"

It is night: a glorious soft summer night. Outside Isolde's chamber is the park; and by the door a lighted torch.

In the prelude we catch a glimpse of what is to follow. There is the quick expectant heart-beat and the eager anticipation of the lover. There is the

sweet atmosphere of the night, and its music of the leaves and the stream. Almost at the beginning the note of tragic ending is struck with the *Day* motive.

DAY.

Next to the constant use of the *Confession of Love* and *Desire*, Wagner has used this *Day* motive more frequently perhaps than any other in the drama, under the most (curious but easily discernible) forms.

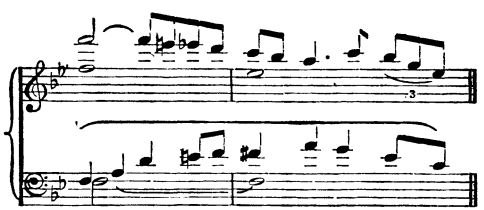
Brangäne is on the steps listening to the hunting horns, which grow fainter in the distance, and betoken the absence of

King Mark. Isolde is deeply agitated. She is longing for the moment when she may extinguish the torch and thus give the signal to the expectant Tristan. In her feverish excitement she fancies the sounds she hears are but those of the rustling leaves and the rippling stream. This Wagner emphasizes with a delightful and masterly touch, by the clarinets, combined with a *tremolo* in the second violins and violas.

Brangäne, however, is still keeping her wits about her. She already suspects the treachery of Melot, and she is half afraid that this midnight hunt has been arranged as a trap for the lovers. As Isolde gives the appointed signal Brangäne retires up the steps leading to the tower. The extinguishing of the torch is accompanied with a descending chromatic scale in the violins. There is

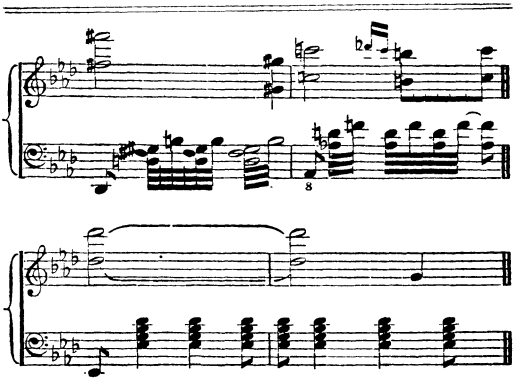
a curious and telling phrase also when Isolde waves her handkerchief.

A motive of which considerable use is made now follows the wonderfully expressive theme of impatience.

LOVE'S CALL.

It will be heard amid the gloriously beautiful interweavings of the long love duet; and it appears again in the final act when Isolde is uttering her last words.

As the lovers meet, their hearts full to overflowing, there begins that superb love duet which is without an equal in

the whole range of music. They gird at the light of day. Why may they not cover themselves for ever with the sweet night of death? Absorbed, and dead to the world, they heed not the breaking of the dawn. Twice Brangäne comes to warn them, but they are oblivious to everything but their sweet communings. It would be superfluous to analyse the glorious web of melody (into

DEATH, THE LIBERATOR.

which the orchestral part is woven with such consummate skill), which makes up this supremely beautiful love duet. It will be sufficient to call attention to the strangely jarring theme which comes in at the end.

At the close of this telling phrase (which will be frequently found in subsequent parts of the music) Brangäne breaks in upon them with a form of the *Day motive.* Then comes the superb Song of Death which forms the foundation of Isolde's wonderful outburst of grief at the end of the drama.

But the trouble expected by Brangäne is at hand. Kurwenal rushes in to be near his master, and behind him come Mark and Melot with a group of courtiers. Melot expects to be praised for opening Mark's eyes to Tristan's wickedness. But Mark is silent, stupe-

fied. How profoundly is his grief expressed in the music. This piece of music is the second finest thing in the whole work, the first being undoubtedly the last song of Isolde in the final act.

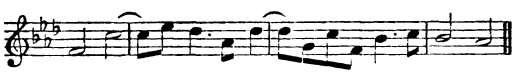
Unfortunately this scene of Mark's comes after the climax of melody in the love duet; and like the great scene at the beginning of the second act of Lohengrin between Telramund and Ortrud, and the narrative of Tannhäuser's pilgrimage in the last act of Tannhäuser, it has been voted dull.

Tristan, on his part, has nothing to say. He takes leave of Isolde and asks her if she will follow him on his lonely journey, the journey of death. He allows himself to be wounded by Melot, who attacks him in savage rage. As he falls into the arms of his faithful squire, Isolde, too, sinks weeping to the ground.

After all the surging music that has accompanied this magnificent ending, a simple chord, that of D minor, brings down the curtain with telling effect.

## The Third Act.

The prelude to the third act is too well known in the concert room to need more than a word of introduction. The yearning and the bitter grief is so poignantly expressed as to be almost painful. It brings back to the mind a picture of the wounded Tristan slowly recovering, buoyed up with hope of seeing his loved one, only to die in her arms, and in this death to meet her again. The wonderful passage of ascending thirds, which the violins give out, is exceptionally characteristic, and will linger long in the memory.

On a couch under a tree, in the middle of the courtyard of his Breton Castle, Karéol, lies Tristan. Kurwenal, in faithful devotion, bends over him to hear if he still breathes. A shepherd pipes a melancholy tune.

This is played on the *cor anglais* and its curious expressiveness, reminiscent of the airs which the Alpine herdsmen play on their flageolets, is developed by Wagner with splendid effect. As in the first act the sailor-lad's song was worked up into the *Sea* motive, so this melancholy tune is woven with great skill during the progress of the act into the delirious ravings of Tristan.

Kurwenal, who has sent a servant to summon Isolde, tries to awaken Tristan

to some knowledge of his surroundings, with only partial success. Tristan's mind, racked with fever, can only grasp one idea, that of his beloved. The memory of all his past life, his unhappy youth, his journey to Ireland, and the grim fate which has been his undoing, all pass before him in a flash. A temporary strength seems to be vouchsafed him when he learns that he may yet see Isolde. But the excitement proves too great a strain, and he falls back exhausted. How wonderful is the soft reiteration of a chord by the clarinets when Kurwenal bends over him to count, as it were, his heart-beats.

A change in the sad melody of the shepherd now announces that Isolde's ship has been sighted. As she reaches the land, Kurwenal goes to meet her, and Tristan's excitement is intense.

His happiness is but short-lived. He tears off his covering and staggers to meet his beloved. At the supreme moment his strength fails him, and he dies as he falls into her arms.

The Invocation to Death so often uttered has at length been heard. The night that Tristan had longed for descends in its fulness and wraps him in never-ending sleep. Sinking beside him, Isolde holds him to her heart as kindly death joins her, too, in its embrace. This swan-song of Isolde's stands out from all the beauties of this entrancing work as the most superlatively beautiful of Wagner's creations.

The shepherd now announces the arrival of King Mark; and Kurwenal, who has hitherto regarded the dying lovers with dumb emotion, starts up to repel the enemy. In the confusion that

follows Melot is killed, but the faithful squire receives his death wound, and crawls to his master's side to die.

Magnanimous to the end, Mark has come to unite the lovers pursued by an unhappy fate. From Brangäne he has learnt the disaster of the love-draught. Death, the Deliverer, has put an end to the lovers' woes, and with an intense yearning, the final chords of this masterpiece mark the rest which comes to human hearts after life's bitter struggle. As Mark raises his hand to bless the dead, the curtain falls.

In No. 141 of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, the programme of a concert which Carl Tausig gave in Vienna, in the winter of 1863, and to which Wagner contributed notes explanatory of the prelude and finale of Tristan, is set out at length. Wagner describes it as Isolde's " Liebes-

tod" and "Verklärung," and it seems strange that this closing scene of "transfiguration" should have been so long mistaken. Wagner's words are as follows: "That which fate parted in life now lives transfigured in death. The gate of reunion is thrown open. Over Tristan's corpse, the dying Isolde descries the most blessed fulfilment of glowing longing, eternal reunion in measureless space, unbarred, unbound, inseparable."

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| Tristan | |
| Isolde | |
| Brangäne | |
| Kurwenal | |
| King Mark | |
| Melot | |
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| Tristan | |
| Isolde | |
| Brangäne | |
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| Tristan | |
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| Tristan | |
| Isolde | |
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| Kurwenal | |
| King Mark | |
| Melot | |

# NIGHTS AT THE OPERA

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